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## Review of Agneta Lind, *Literacy for All: Making a Difference* and John Oxenham, *Effective Literacy Programmes: Options for Policy-Makers*


Gina Arnone

University of Pennsylvania, ginaarnone@gmail.com

Daniel A. Wagner

University of Pennsylvania, wagner@literacy.upenn.edu

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## Review of Agneta Lind, *Literacy for All: Making a Difference* and John Oxenham, *Effective Literacy Programmes: Options for Policy-Makers*

### **Abstract**

The 1990 World Conference on Education for All (EFA) in Jomtien (Thailand) spurred a collective global movement to meet the basic learning needs of each person, with a special focus on developing countries. Ten years later, with the stated goals not met, and indeed far from it, the international community renewed its commitments in Dakar, Senegal. At the World Education Forum in 2000, national and organizational representatives resolved to improve educational opportunities and services and set six objectives for 2015, including a 50 percent increase in adult literacy. Despite this pledge and others (e.g., launch of the UN Literacy Decade in 2003), progress toward literacy for all, and for adults in particular, has been frustratingly slow. Agneta Lind, with *Literacy for All: Making a Difference*, and John Oxenham, with *Effective Literacy Programmes: Options for Policy-Makers* describe and promote the significance of developing literacy skills in adults and call for an intensification of efforts to do so. Lind and Oxenham, each with extensive international experience in literacy program implementation and research, are very well equipped to write these two complementary volumes in UNESCO's Fundamentals of Educational Planning series.

### **Disciplines**

Adult and Continuing Education | Bilingual, Multilingual, and Multicultural Education | Curriculum and Instruction | Education | Educational Administration and Supervision | Educational Assessment, Evaluation, and Research | Educational Methods | International and Comparative Education | Language and Literacy Education

she already knows and understands and can achieve? So, following David's lead, apart from recommending this book to everyone who is interested in promoting and learning more about children's rights, I hope the book will be read by all teachers, play and youth workers, and others who are in regular contact with children and young people.

PRISCILLA ALDERSON  
*University of London*

*Literacy for All: Making a Difference* by Agneta Lind. Paris: UNESCO/International Institute for Educational Planning, 2008. 147 pp. €15.00 (paper). ISBN 978-92-803-1313-0.

*Effective Literacy Programmes: Options for Policy-Makers* by John Oxenham. Paris: UNESCO/International Institute for Educational Planning, 2008. 140 pp. €15.00 (paper). ISBN 978-92-803-1318-5.

The 1990 World Conference on Education for All (EFA) in Jomtien (Thailand) spurred a collective global movement to meet the basic learning needs of each person, with a special focus on developing countries. Ten years later, with the stated goals not met, and indeed far from it, the international community renewed its commitments in Dakar, Senegal. At the World Education Forum in 2000, national and organizational representatives resolved to improve educational opportunities and services and set six objectives for 2015, including a 50 percent increase in adult literacy. Despite this pledge and others (e.g., launch of the UN Literacy Decade in 2003), progress toward literacy for all, and for adults in particular, has been frustratingly slow. Agneta Lind, with *Literacy for All: Making a Difference*, and John Oxenham, with *Effective Literacy Programmes: Options for Policy-Makers*, describe and promote the significance of developing literacy skills in adults and call for an intensification of efforts to do so. Lind and Oxenham, each with extensive international experience in literacy program implementation and research, are very well equipped to write these two complementary volumes in UNESCO's Fundamentals of Educational Planning series.

Lind's book is concerned with both the concept and practice of literacy: learning to read and write, including numeracy, and the associated implications for individual, community, and national development. With both broad and nuanced arguments, Lind builds a strong case for the importance of investing in the development of adult literacy skills. She deals with general issues, such as why literacy is a basic human right, and she assesses details, like the program cost per successful adult literacy learner as compared with the costs associated with 4 years of primary school education across diverse contexts. With years of experience in development organizations, especially in Africa, Lind brings a wealth of information into her writing.

Lind begins with a summary of recent literacy statistics and an assessment of the complexities that have contributed to slow progress in developing literacy skills

in adults (chap. 1). She then moves into a discussion of various historical and contemporary meanings of literacy and related concepts (chap. 2). Confusing terminology, Lind makes clear, has fueled misunderstandings between educators working toward the same goal. In chapter 3, she explains why the fostering of literacy skills in adults (not just children) ought to be a priority and argues that there is an urgent need to improve on ineffective strategies evident across multiple levels of management. In chapter 4, she describes how successful initiatives require appropriate and sufficient context supports, including political will and a literate environment (e.g., available printed materials). Lind then describes a number of pedagogical approaches used by adult literacy educators (chap. 5) and offers monitoring and evaluation recommendations (chap. 6). In chapter 7, she discusses the strategies of governmental and nongovernmental organizations and the interplay between the two. Finally, she briefly summarizes and recaps her main points (chap. 8).

While Lind's book covers important issues, several require further comment. First, she does not adequately engage some current theoretical debates. For example, with her account of the New Literacy Studies (NLS), an approach that considers literacy as a social practice, Lind misleadingly reduces it to an endorsement of learner-generated materials. This is particularly noteworthy given the centrality of NLS for researchers concerned with literacy in a cultural context. Second, with a too-brief discussion of digital literacy, she seems to conflate the use of technology as an important skill to acquire and the use of technology as a medium for instruction and learning. Third, there are numerous places where it is unclear how Lind arrives at her conclusions. For example, she states that "the most commonly agreed upon approach" (90) to literacy instruction is to proceed from sentence and word meanings to phonics, as opposed to the reverse order. However, she does not discuss the specific supporting and opposing arguments that scholars have put forth in this ongoing pedagogical debate. Similarly, she makes general statements, such as "the benefits [of adult literacy] are well documented" (67), but then fails to provide any supporting documentation. While Lind's positions often make sense, the research base is not always brought to bear as much as her own (clearly valuable) professional experiences.

Oxenham's primary focus is to alert educators and policy makers to challenges in designing and implementing adult literacy programs and to offer concrete steps that might improve the likelihood of success. The planning and implementation of literacy programs must address problems common across contexts, while also considering the political, economic, and cultural forces particular to each society. Oxenham does not aim to advance a particular approach but rather to present different strategies, each of which might prove effective if suitable to a given context.

In the first chapter, Oxenham provides a solid grounding on the importance of adult literacy in the EFA and UN Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) context. The bulk of the book is divided into two well-structured and clearly written sections: literacy program expectations (chap. 2) and implementation options (chaps. 3–6). The former section paints a picture of a quality literacy program, highlighting limitations and setbacks that ought to be expected; it also provides a particularly insightful summary of the rights-based approach to adult literacy. The latter illustrates different program planning and implementation options with the assumption that the efficacy of a particular strategy will vary with context. This

section is comprehensive, including topics such as, teacher recruitment and training, aspects of functional literacy and literate environments, and the importance of monitoring and evaluation efforts.

Oxenham, in this small book, provides a very useful and updated primer on the “how-to” aspects of literacy programming, weaving in a number of research studies into his claims. He seems to try to strike an even balance on some of the controversial issues, such as volunteers versus professional staff, or between textbook-based approaches and Freirian types of learner-developed texts. Some areas, however, seem particularly lacking, such as in his final chapter dealing with “cutting-edge” technologies. Very little is cutting edge, and almost no documentation is provided. After this palpably inadequate discussion, the book ends with a few small paragraphs by way of conclusion, as if the author ran out of time. Other than such lapses, the remainder of the book makes a valuable contribution.

Both Lind and Oxenham convey the urgent need to invest in adult literacy. Individually, each book adds to an understanding of the social and political circumstances that can inhibit or enable adult literacy skill development. Taken together, they also illustrate that the ways in which educators and policy makers should address low levels of literacy in adults can be cause for substantive debate. For example, Lind focuses on the benefits of using primers rather than learner-generated materials, whereas Oxenham advocates for the initial use of local materials over prepackaged texts. Such differences are useful for moving the field forward. In addition, both authors address the issue of language of instruction, citing it as important for literacy. Unfortunately, the authors basically agree with an uncritical approach—saying that this is a complex situation, with little to say beyond laying out the issues. Similarly, both lament the limitations of an inadequate research base but sometimes (as in the case of language of instruction) make insufficient use of what is available. Further, much of the cited research relies on work done over a decade ago or is taken from secondary analyses (such as UNESCO documents). In other words, specialists will find themselves wondering why conclusions are made on a fairly narrow selection of the available knowledge base. Admittedly, both volumes are designed as planning documents and should not be held to a higher standard of in-depth reviews of research.

In sum, both volumes are timely, as the UN Decade for Literacy ends in 2013, and there is ample need to reinforce and inform those who are trying to reach the broad goals of improved global literacy. Each will make a contribution, mainly in summarizing the status of the past and recent past. But neither volume has charted out much in the way of new ground, something that is much needed in a domain that has struggled to become more relevant in the education sector.

GINA ARNONE and DANIEL A. WAGNER  
*University of Pennsylvania*